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Waterloo: The Fall of Napoleon

The pouring rain chilled my bones to the core. The cold seemed to render all my layers of clothing useless as I shivered heavily in the night. Determined not to show weakness in front of the younger troops, I warmed my hands by the small fire that the *grenadiers-a-pied* had built, and then strode off through the muddy bog. It had been three months since the fighting had begun, three months since Emperor Napoleon’s miraculous return from exile in Elba. Only three months since the collective armies of the French nation had welcomed him back with open arms. And here we waited, just one day removed from a huge victory over the Prussian *putains* at Ligny. What we waited for I did not know, but the Emperor was sure it would come. And now he had called a meeting of the generals, something I had not seen happen since my conscription days in the wars against the Second Coalition.

As was my duty, I struggled through the muddy conditions and torrential rain to rouse General Friant, commander of the 1st Division. Inside my war-torn boots, my bare feet felt the cold of the muddy swamp below. The conditions 13 kilometers east of the village they called Waterloo were anything but ideal. As another member of the Guard Cavalry had said, you’d have to be a mad dog to settle here for the night. This, according to Napoleon, was the point. I grimaced in pain as the open sores on my feet made contact again and again with the swampy earth. With each step, I feared that I would soon be sucked deep into the very bowels of nature. The rattling of my heavy plate and rifle startled the sentries outside Friant’s tent, instantly putting them on the alert. I smirked as they came upon the realization that they had been asleep. With a motion at a salute, I shoved the two fools aside and entered the General’s tent.

“General Friant, the Emperor requests an audience. Draw yourself out of slumber and join me in these hellish conditions.” A garbled response was his answer, and I settled myself into a corner of his tent, giving him some privacy while also shielding myself from the pounding rain. Within moments, I watched as the General dressed himself in the *tricolor*, as noble and dignified as ever.

“Lead the way…eh…eh…”

“Aubert, sir. Marc Aubert”.

“*Oui,* Aubert, let us go.” The two of us made our way to where the Emperor was stationed, a tent central to all the others. It was impossible to miss, decorated well beyond the ordinary tents of myself or Friant. We entered and found a large assortment of generals and assistants assembled at a table with the Emperor at its head. Napoleon raised his eyebrows and acknowledged us, remaining silent. He motioned to the two chairs, one for Friant directly to his right and my own that was across the table, next to General Pajol of the 1st Cavalry Corps and General Milhaud of the 3rd. As we sat down, the Emperor began to speak.

“*Messieurs*, it is my pleasure to welcome you to this meeting. Soon we will strike a death blow to the Coalition dogs, led by that *salop*, General Wellington. Friant, I believe you have a report for us?”

“Yes sir. Last night, while the majority of the camp celebrated our victory at Ligny, a few members of my regiment and I rode on ahead to scout the Coalition’s camp. We found them about three kilometers east of our current position; camped out near the road they call Brussels.”

“Very good, Friant.” He turned to his men and took a deep breath to compose himself, almost uttering a silent prayer before addressing all of us. “Just because you have all heard of Wellington, you think he’s a good general. I tell you Wellington is a bad general, the English are bad troops and this affair is nothing more than just eating breakfast. Today, we fight not for ourselves but for all our fellow countrymen. Today we fight for the pride of all of France. Today, we fight for victory!” A thunderous roar met Napoleon’s words as the collective generals of the French army realized that a battle would soon be approaching. Napoleon dismissed the generals with a wave of his hand, and retired to his tent to prepare himself. As we walked, I did nothing to hide my excitement.

“Today, we strike a fatal blow, Pajol! Just think, all of our work now culminates in the battles to follow. I cannot wait to return home to my family, victorious.”

“Be careful, lest your overconfidence be your undoing, Aubert. Go and ready your horse. The cavalry marches in an hour.” With that, he motioned at a salute and then waded his way through the swampy conditions back to his own tent. I hurried to the stables to prepare my horse, as Pajol had commanded. The stableboys, Jean and Lupita had seen me coming from a distance and were already saddling Fabien when I arrived. Fabien had been a gift to me from my uncle after the Battle of Hohenlinden. After a huge victory over the Second Coalition there, I was promoted to the Imperial Guard. It was unusual for one as young as myself, just 20 years of age at the time, but Napoleon’s incessant wars required replacements for those brave men that were dying abroad. I received formal training with a musket and was awarded my very own cuirass to go with my new uniform of the *tricolor*. With such a large debt to pay to Napoleon and his men, it was only natural for me to be one of the first conscripted into Napoleon’s army against the Seventh Coalition. I had heard tell that the size of our army exceeded 70,000, and all troops were veterans of at least one battle.

Jean handed me the reigns, and I mounted Fabien. He whinnied gently as I patted him on the side, and whispered gently into his ears, as had been our custom for the past twelve years. I nodded my head in appreciation in Jean and Lupita’s direction, and then nudged Fabien onwards. As Fabien cantered through the slop and mud, my eyes took in the sights of our camp. Morale was high, as was to be expected following Ligny’s routs. Everywhere I looked, the *tricolor* stared back at me. Generals that I had only heard of in stories and veterans of just one skirmish all prepared for the war together. It was then that I realized that none of the men were battle ready. Helmets were strewn here and there, swords unsharpened, guns unloaded, and pieces of armor lying all about the place. I dug my heels into Fabien’s sides and sped towards General Mortier.

“Mortier. What’s going on? I thought the Emperor just gave orders to march towards Brussels road?”

“In case you had not noticed, Aubert, the horses can barely move in this muck. Our cannon cannot either. The Emperor has postponed movements for an hour. We begin….agh…” Mortier’s eyes snapped shut, revealing his clear pain. I charged forward on Fabien and latched on to his shoulder to prevent him from falling off his horse.

“Mortier! Are you all right?!” I looked around desperately for help and my gaze fell on Herbert, one of my better friends in the army. “Herbert, fetch water for the general! Make haste!” As Herbert careened off to the nearest tent, I shook the General. His eyes opened slightly, and he opened his mouth wide enough to grumble,

“Back…pains….ugh…..” By that time, Herbert had returned with the water. I doused the General with it while the medics rode up. 15 minutes later, Friant had been named temporary commander of the Imperial Guard. I could not say that I was not satisfied with this. For me, there was no joy like marching into battle for my country with my friends at my side. Friant maintained Mortier’s statement that we would wait for better conditions before launching our primary offensive.

Minutes turned into hours of waiting. The cavalry that had been ready, dismounted and many of the men started engaging in wrestling and gambling to pass the time. As a veteran of 12 years, I knew better than to expend my energy in such worthless violence, and instead decided to sleep on Fabien. What felt like mere minutes later, I was rudely roused by a page’s report.

“By order of the Emperor Napoleon, prepare your troops for assault! Colonel Reille’s Corps and d’Erlon’s Corps are to attack the village of Mont-Saint-Jean! At 1:00 in the afternoon, the Cavalry Corps and 1st Division infantry are to meet Wellington’s forces at Hougoumont!” The wrestling and rambunctious attitude of the warriors transformed into enthusiasm for war. The revelry was replaced by the sound of metal clanging as the troops readied themselves for battle. I resumed my soothing murmurings in Fabian’s ear, and then cantered over to my position in the formation of the troops. It appeared that the Imperial Guard would be involved in the first strike at Hougoumont. I saw Friant raise his hands and yell,

“CAVALRY! FORWARD!” It was a slow moving assault. The cavalry marched behind the infantry, as it would come down to them to launch the first offensive. Ahead of me, men struggled through the horrible conditions that had not improved as much as we would have liked. Another hour passed before we finally caught sight of Wellington’s troops. His right flank faced us directly, garrisoned at the Hougoumont farm. We had been told that his army was camped all along Brussels street, his left flank ending at Mont-Saint-Jean. It was then that Napoleon’s tactics dawned on me. He would attempt to divide and conquer Wellington’s army, turning the battle into a rout. Brimming with confidence, the infantrymen charged.

The carnage that followed in the next 30 minutes was unlike anything I had ever seen. Our artillery began bombarding Wellington’s right flank, and for many minutes it appeared that there would be no response fire. Then we heard the screaming. In the first burst of British fire, I saw the first real deaths in the war. At least 15 men, by my count. Dead.

“*CHASSEURS*! RETREAT 15 METERS!”, came Friant’s desperate yell. We could not afford to lose horsemen this early in the running.

“WHERE’S THE FIRE COMING FROM?!”, I shouted. The overpowering sound of gunfire drowned out my voice. To my left, I saw Friant’s eyes scanning the countryside. They settled on to a small ridge that sat about a kilometer behind the farm. Obviously the commander of the infantry saw it as well, and we started moving forward.

“WE TAKE THE RIDGE!”, came Friant’s voice. Easier said than done, I thought grimly. I nudged Fabien forward as the infantry had gained a suitable lead on us. The sickening sound of crunching as hooves met the bones of the fallen infantry made my stomach turn. Not wishing to close my eyes, I methodically started counting the number of troops that remained, a surefire way to distract myself from the revolting symphony of war. Before I reached the count of 100, we had made our way to the ridge where our infantrymen were engaging the Coalition troops in hand to hand combat. This, I realized, was going to be a massacre. Perhaps Wellington was as poor a commander as the Emperor had made him out to be. His men were armed with no short ranged weapons of any sort, barring their fists.

Then I saw them. Standing at the top of the ridge, smirking in their red and black outfit was an entire line of British infantrymen, armed with rifles. An ambush. I yelled out, but to no avail. No one could hear me beyond the deafening sounds of gunfire and metal finding metal. No one could hear my screams of horror as the British took aim and fired. And then reloaded and started again. The infantrymen were getting annihilated. My gaze fell upon Friant for direction. The look in his eyes assured me that he had seen the British. He raised his sword and then motioned backwards. The cavalry would retreat. I raised my eyebrows questioningly at the fighting infantry, but Friant just shook his head sadly. They would be left for dead.

The Imperial Guard Cavalry returned to camp yet to fight in a battle themselves. Friant’s conservative measures were praised, but we all knew he, like the rest of us, was itching to get back into combat.

Napoleon’s final orders came through an hour and a half later. We were to be led by General Ney on what would be our last stand. The 4th Chasseurs, Old Guard and Imperial Guard had combined into what was being called the Middle Guard, a sizable force that would singlehandedly be able to take down Wellington and his army. Ney was known as *Le Rougeaud*, the red-faced, and today was no exception. Like most of the other men in his newly formed battalion, Ney’s face was red with rage and lust for war. His normally impeccable attire was a strange tinge of brown. Caked blood. His face, though, seemed to be etched out of stone. Strong and determined, he boomed,

“MIDDLE GUARD! NOW WE TAKE LA HAYE SANTE AND LEAD FRANCE TO VICTORY!” We took to the standard formation, Old Guard in the front, 4th Chasseurs filling out the Middle, and the Imperial Guard following close behind. Infantrymen were mixed in with horses, as were cannon and other weapons of artillery. The potpourri of forces only built our confidence. We charged up over the first ridge of the Hougoumont, expecting to catch the British unawares. It was not so. One of the troops from the 6th Infantry had deserted and warned the British of our arrival. Led by General Halkett, the British brigade came charging down the ridge. Gunshots rang out, earsplitting in the quickly evaporating daylight. Sweat began to drip down the sides of my neck, running down into my jerkin. My hands did not stop shaking as I raised my gun. And fired. I could scarcely watch as the British infantryman I aimed at fell to the ground, writhing in sheer agony. His helmet fell off as he dropped to his knees, and I saw he could not have been older than 18 years old. My stomach churned again, but I ignored it and moved on. Country first, emotions later. Three more people met death by my hands, and another five or so by Fabien’s hooves. We drove the British back in a trying uphill charge, decimating their forces.

Victory appeared to be ours as we mounted the crest of the first ridge. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach as I surveyed the countryside, and saw my suspicions had been confirmed. Again, Wellington had fooled us, sacrificing one unit for the success of the Coalition. Thousands of Belgian and Dutch troops swarmed us, driving us back with bayonets. From my vantage point above Fabien, I realized that Wellington’s men were only killing French infantry, staying away from Chasseurs. And then I saw why. Instead of reaching up to stab the men riding the horses, the Coalitionists were stabbing the horses themselves, forcing the Chasseurs to the ground where they would undoubtedly be trampled.

“*La Garde recule!”*

I urged Fabien to hurry through the slop and mud, now oblivious to the crunching sound his hooves made as they intermittently made contact with the dead on the ground below. Fabien ran valiantly, but all was lost. A gunshot pierced the night, and his back leg collapsed. I was thrown off the horse, flung some ten meters to its right. A nauseating thud sounded as I struck the ground, front first. Another gunshot. Pain exploded on the right side of my chest. I could feel its tendrils making their way all throughout my body. Wishing to end the suffering, I fumbled around for my own weapon, but was unable to sum up the strength to pull it out of its holster. Mud caked my eyes, and I tried to open them, to get one last look at the damage.

The French troops had been routed. In the midst of thousands of infantrymen, I caught sight of one man on his horse, raising his hat in the air. Wellington. All around, Coalition troops were searching for Frenchmen. Many of the wounded raised white handkerchiefs in capitulation. Despite my condition, I spat into the ground. My vision began to blur as I pulled myself upright. Even now, three Coalition troops had spotted me and were coming over to my aid. Deliberately, I put one hand into my coat and pulled out my pistol. Taking another look at Wellington celebrating, victorious, I spat into the ground once more. The Coalition men that were coming for me were now only fifteen meters away. Using my last reserve of strength, I cocked and loaded the pistol. Putting it to my head, I remembered what General Mortier had told me, all those years ago when I first joined the Guard. “*La Garde meurt mais ne se rend pas.*” The Guard dies, but does not surrender. I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger.

Works Cited/Attribution of Research

1. "Adolphe Edouard Casimir Joseph Mortier, Duc De Trévise, Marshal (1804)." *The Napoleon Series*. Web. 23 Mar. 2011.

* General Mortier was originally supposed to be in charge of the Imperial Guard.
* Mortier went down with back spasms and was unable to participate in the battle of waterloo.

1. Eliting, J. R. *Swords Around a Throne: Napoleon's Grande Armée.* Da Capo, 1997. Print.

* Grenadiers-a-pied were the gun bearing infantrymen for the French.
* In wars against the 2nd Coalition, Napoleon called several meetings of the generals.
* Napoleon’s tent was decorated well beyond that of the ordinary soldier.
* Napoleon often referred to Wellington as a *salop* (a French expletive).
* The French scored a huge victory at Hohenlinden against the 2nd Coalition.
* When the French were routed many of the younger soldiers surrendered.

1. "French Cavalry: Cavalerie Française: Französische Kavallerie: Uniforms: Organization:

Weapons." *Napoleon, His Army and Enemies : Napoleonic Battles : Uniforms : Maps : Tactics*. Web. 23 Mar. 2011

* The Guard Cavalry were the second highest level of cavalry – second only to the Imperial Guard.
* There were generally 3 or 4 stables in Napoleonic Camps, each manned by two people.
* The Cavalry Corps usually marched behind Infantry in combat, especially the Grenadier Cavalry.
* Chasseurs in the Imperial Guard always carried rifles and another small handgun.

1. "French Order of Battle." *BritishBattles.com*. Web. 23 Mar. 2011.

* Grenadiers-a-pied were part of the Waterloo army.
* General Friant headed up the 1st Division of Infantry.
* The Guard Cavalry worked under the Imperial Guard.
* General Pajol was of the 1st Cavalry Corps.
* General Milhaud was of the 3rd Cavalry Corps.
* The 4th Chasseurs, Old Guard, and Imperial Guard combined to form the Middle Guard.
* “*La Garde recule!”*
* “*La Garde meurt mais ne se rend pas.*”

1. "General Louis Friant." *Virtual Arc De Triomphe 1792-1815*. Web. 23 Mar. 2011.

* Friant was the commander of the 1st Division.
* After Mortier went down with injury, Friant was given his duties.
* General Friant was a noble and a veteran of many years.
* The night before the Battle of Waterloo, Friant’s men did scouting of the Coalition.
* Friant tried to take the bridge at Hougoumont.

1. *London Gazette* 22 June 1815, 17028th ed., sec. 1213. *London Gazette Online*. Web. 27

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* Many of the French soldiers complained of open sores on their feet from poor quality shoes.
* The Coalition men were camped out near Brussels road.
* This source also detailed Napoleon’s speech about Wellington (bad general). Lifted word for word, with added artistic interpretation.
* Napoleon’s strategy was to divide and conquer the Coalition troops.
* French and Coalition artillery exchanged fire near the ridge outside Hougoumont.
* The Chasseurs were forced to retreat, so as not to lose cavalry early.
* General Ney (red face) was given command of the Middle Guard.

1. "The Battle of Waterloo 18th June 1815." *British Battles - Analysing and Documenting*

*British Battles from the Previous Centuries*. Web. 23 Mar. 2011.

* Napoleon was exiled to Elba.
* Napoleon escaped Elba and returned to France for 100 days (his second rule).
* Most of the people in Napoleon’s army were over 35 years of age.
* Colonel Reilly and d’Erlon’s corps were deployed first.
* Cavalry Corps and 1st Infantry were deployed next, directed to Hougoumont farm.
* Wellington’s right flank was garrisoned at Hougoumont.
* Wellington’s left flank was at Mont-Saint-Jean.

1. "The Battle of Waterloo." *Battle of Waterloo*. Web. 23 Mar. 2011.

* It rained the entire night before Waterloo.
* The French beat the Prussians at the Battle of Ligny, days before Waterloo.
* The French were camped 13 kilometers East of the village of Waterloo.
* The soldiers dressed in the traditional tricolor, the red, white, and blue.
* The cavalry originally planned to march at 11.
* The army’s size exceeded 70,000.
* All of the French soldiers at the battle of Waterloo were veterans of at least one campaign.
* Many Frenchmen gambled and wrestled to pass the time.
* The French infantry was massacred at Hougoumont.
* The British charge (fueled by a traitor) was led by Halkett.
* The French were successful in taking the ridge by Hougoumont, but were driven back by bayonets.